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N.J.'s new rules for when cops can use force leave 1 big unanswered question: What about police dogs?

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New Jersey just announced new limits on when cops can shoot, hit or chase suspects.

But officials are still grappling with how police dogs should be used.

Some law enforcement and civil rights organizations want K-9s banned entirely when it comes to arrests, and the state attorney general said he would make a final decision in the coming months.

The “use of dogs against people of color has a long and horrific history,” Gurbir Grewal recently wrote to law enforcement leaders, citing the German Shepherds used against peaceful civil rights protesters in the 1960s.

However, some officers have argued that K-9s are a helpful tool to protect cops and the public, he said.

Grewal directed staff to research how many police dogs are in the state, how they are trained and when they’ve bitten residents, among other information, and submit recommendations by the end of March.

He’ll make a decision soon after, according to a spokesman.

The state’s new use-of-force policy does limit when cops can use K-9s.

Dogs cannot be used against someone who is only resisting arrest, and they cannot be used for crowd control at “peaceful demonstrations,” according to the rules. K-9s can be taken to protests to look for bombs or similar threats, and K-9s should only be used against a crowd if somebody’s life is at risk.

Some want the policy to go further.

“Dog bites can cause life-altering injuries, even death,” said Jiles Ship, a former police officer who now heads the state chapter of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

It’s better to train cops how to de-escalate situations than invest in animals that can’t be fully controlled, he said. Even a dog’s presence can traumatize minority communities, and violent attacks can lead to expensive lawsuits, Ship added.

“All you need is one incident like that to go to the media, and that will push policing back 20 years,” he said.

Others argued that suspects often surrendered without a fight only because a dog was nearby.

“They’re taking away a valuable, valuable asset,” said Asa Anderson III, a retired trooper who spent years working with State Police dogs.

K-9 training had improved dramatically since the civil rights era, he said, and dogs that didn’t follow orders were immediately taken off patrol.

“It’s still a better alternative than deadly force,” Anderson said.

Mistakes certainly happened, added Joe Nicholas, training director for the Atlantic County Police K-9 Academy. But the answer was more oversight, not a ban, he said.

Nicholas estimated that between 180 and 200 patrol dogs were employed by around 90 law enforcement agencies statewide.

When compared to other types of force, New Jersey K-9s have been used far less against suspects in recent years.

Officers reported using dogs about 200 times from 2012 through 2016, according to use-of-force reports.

The vast majority of suspects, at least 177, were injured and more than three dozen were hospitalized, although it was rarely clear how they were injured and officers may not have filled out reports if a dog was on scene but not released.

Most of the suspects were Black or Hispanic. Several situations involved people running away, and officers did not list any resulting criminal charges for some who were chased.

K-9s did not kill any suspects during that period, according to the force records.

That doesn’t mean bites didn’t cause serious damage.

A study from Indiana University of Pennsylvania noted that dog bites can puncture sheet metal. Another review of one California department found bites led to dozens of operations for torn arteries, joints and tendons.

In New Jersey, Atlantic City has paid out \$700,000 and \$3 million after K-9s were involved in violent arrests in 2012 and 2013. One man needed 200 stitches after a police dog bit him repeatedly, an attack partially caught on video.

The K-9’s handler now faces criminal charges.

A ban would almost certainly not affect police dogs' other jobs, such as looking for bodies in a collapsed building or sniffing out contraband. One State Police dog can even smell hidden electronics.

But new limits could affect other situations where K-9s are currently used.

One recent confrontation between Voorhees cops and a 37-year-old was captured by body cameras.

On Sept. 6, Richard Belline sped his car into a parking lot, hit a curb, blew a tire, jumped out and attempted to run away, officials said.

He was stopped by a Voorhees officer who pinned him to the asphalt. A short while later, another cop arrived and pulled a dog out of his SUV.

"You're gonna get bit by this dog if you don't show your hands" the officer said to Belline, according to the video. The dog pulled at the leash, barking a few feet from Belline's face.

After a few moments, the officer put the dog back inside and Belline was restrained by hand.

That was a good example of a handler using restraint after he realized the suspect was in distress, Voorhees Sgt. Ken Sacavitch told NJ Advance Media. It had been years since a dog actually bit someone, he said.

"When we do our training it's not all bite, bite, bite," said Sacavitch, who supervises the department's six K-9s. "We'd rather have a surrender than an apprehension."

Belline, who said he'd used methamphetamine, died later at a hospital, triggering an automatic investigation into the overall encounter. That review is ongoing.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Joe Atmonavage contributed to this report.